

Spotlight on abortion activist makes Catholics nervous

by [Daniel Burke](#)

April 26, 2011

WASHINGTON (RNS) Anti-abortion activist Lila Rose has shared the stage with Sarah Palin, seen her exploits extolled on Fox News and drawn comparisons to heroic Gentiles who sheltered Jews during the Holocaust.

So why are some conservative Christians so uneasy about her work?

The telegenic 22-year-old will address the seventh annual National Catholic Prayer Breakfast on Wednesday (April 27) in Washington, along with former House Speaker Newt Gingrich and Virginia Gov. Robert McDonnell.

Rose, who converted to Catholicism two years ago, is founder and president of Live Action, which she calls "a new media pro-life organization." The group has released dozens of covertly taped videos in which Rose and other activists pose as pimps or underage girls seeking abortions, birth control or exams from unwitting Planned Parenthood clinics.

Joseph Cella, a conservative political consultant who founded the prayer breakfast, called Rose a poster child for Jesus' counsel that Christians be "shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves."

"Lila is one of the bright young leaders of the pro-life movement," Cella said. "She is going to be around for a long time."

Cella acknowledged, though, that Rose's work has provoked a "family squabble" among conservative Christians.

In fact, the Live Action debate seems less an internecine spat than a university seminar, with philosophers and political scientists

consumed by a clear-cut but complex question: Is it ever moral to lie?

Rose said Live Action's deceptive tactics serve a larger truth.

"The purpose of all our visual investigative work is to expose abuses and injustices against those who are defenseless," she said.

Her target, Planned Parenthood, receives about \$360 million in federal funding. By law, none of that money can be used for abortions, which the nationwide group says constitute 3 percent of its services.

Rose's brand of activism resembles that of James O'Keefe, the conservative provocateur whose work led to the federal defunding of the community group ACORN and the resignation of two National Public Radio executives. Rose and O'Keefe collaborated on similar video projects several years ago at the University of California, Los Angeles.

In Live Action videos released in February, Planned Parenthood employees appear willing to help presumed pimps obtain medical care and abortions for underage prostitutes.

Seizing on the videos, House Republicans -- and 11 Democrats -- voted to defund Planned Parenthood in February; the resolution later died in the Senate.

Planned Parenthood calls the tapes "hoaxes" that are "clearly doctored and cannot be trusted." But it also fired a New Jersey employee and pledged to re-educate staff on rules for reporting dangers to young girls.

Many conservative Christians rejoiced at the blow to Planned Parenthood, but Princeton University scholar Robert P. George was not among them.

The "sting" videos are a form of lying, which the Catholic Church teaches is "always and everywhere wrong," George wrote in a February blog post.

"We must not permit our cause to be sullied by lying," continued George, a leading intellectual who advises the U.S. Catholic bishops.

"We must not abandon faith in the power of truth to transform those who oppose us in the great struggle over the protection of human life in all stages and conditions."

Other Catholic scholars worry that defending Rose's deceptions means joining the Western trend toward moral relativism, which church leaders, including Pope Benedict XVI, have fiercely fought.

A recent editorial in the flagship evangelical magazine Christianity Today said "unease" about Live Action's methods "has embittered what might have been reckoned a sweet triumph." The magazine also questioned whether Rose's "ethical shortcuts" rely too heavily on scandal to fight legalized abortion.

Debating the morality of undercover work is actually an ancient Christian tradition, according to Christopher Tollefsen, a professor of philosophy at the University of South Carolina.

St. Augustine tried to settle the argument back in the fourth century: He wanted to stop Christians from spying on rival sects to root out heresy.

Rose said that she has consulted with her spiritual director and other Catholics, who offered assurance that history is also rife with saints who used deception for worthy causes.

Take, for instance, the Hebrew midwives who lied to protect children from a murderous pharaoh, and priests who forged baptismal certificates to save Jews during the Holocaust.

"The bottom line is this," Rose said. "It's a tradition in our church, and we are doing this to expose the truth and to instruct and illuminate, posing as real cases that are happening every day."

Peter Kreeft, a Catholic philosopher at Boston College, agrees with Rose.

"The closest analogy I can think of ... is spying," Kreeft wrote in a recent column. "If Live Action is wrong, then so is all spying, including spying out the Nazis' atomic bomb projects and saving the

world from a nuclear holocaust."

Rose's lawyer, Peter Breen of the Thomas More Society, calls the Live Action debate "much ado about nothing."

"Their behavior seems no different from what a police department would engage in, or `60 Minutes,' or `Dateline,'" Breen said. "They engage in investigative journalism to learn the truth."